

Tribes of the Rainforest

Rainforests are fascinating ecosystems. Our rainforests are not just home to animals and plants; they are also home to groups of people. There are many tribes of people who call the rainforest home but the most well-known are the Yanomami tribe, the pygmy tribe and the Huli tribe.



The Yanomami Tribe

The Yanomami tribe live in the South American rainforest. Some of those in this tribe have had little or even no contact with the outside world. It is believed that there are around 35 000 people in this tribe living in the rainforest.

The Yanomami place a great deal of importance on equality. As a result of this, they have no chiefs, unlike many other tribes.

They live in very large circular houses that have no coverings over their central areas. There can be as many as 400 people living in one of these houses. The area in the centre is kept for social gatherings and families have their own space for sleeping and cooking around the covered section.

When it comes to clothing, the Yanomami do not wear a great deal because of the hot climate. They like to decorate themselves with flowers and feathers. They also will often pierce their faces with bones as further decoration.

As a tribe, the Yanomami rely on the rainforest to provide for their needs, both in terms of food and medicine. They also grow their own crops and will fish too.

Sadly, there are many threats to the Yanomami way of life, such as disease, lack of healthcare, the development of gold mines and the expansion of cattle farms.



The Huli Tribe

The Huli tribe are another tribe who are indigenous to the rainforest. They live in Papua New Guinea and it is thought there are around 65 000 in the tribe.

Nowadays, only around 10% of the Huli population live in the traditional way, as many have adopted a more western lifestyle.

However, for those who still hold to the traditions, their traditional houses are made from grass and tend to be round. All of the men in the tribe live together, often at the centre of the village. The women and children share houses further out from the centre.

One of the most interesting traditions of Huli culture is their tradition for growing wigs! The male members of the tribe will grow their hair in special ways, adding feathers from various exotic birds. The wigs are cut off every once in a while and sold, sometimes for a lot of money. However, this practice must stop once the Huli man gets married! Older men who are experienced and skilled in this art are very sought after. Many are concerned that, because of the increasing westernisation of the tribe, the wig-growing skills will soon be lost.



The Pygmy Tribe

The pygmy tribe can be found in the rainforest of West and Central Africa. This is the largest of the tribes; it is estimated that their population is around half a million.

The Pygmy tribe are distinctive because of their small stature, although this helps them in their rainforest environment. Many pygmies now wear western clothing but their traditional dress is made from bark and leaves.

Music plays an important part in the lives of the pygmy tribe and they particularly enjoy using their voices in harmony.

The pygmy tribe traditionally live in huts, built with bits of trees and leaves from the rainforest. They also rely on the rainforest for their food and for ingredients for their medicine. Hunting is an important part of pygmy life and they hunt for wild animals to eat. Before they go hunting, the people from the tribe perform a ceremony in which they ask permission from the spirits of the rainforest to hunt its animals.

The pygmy tribe faces many threats to their way of life. Conservation projects, farmers, poachers and disease all threaten to erode this way of life which has taken place in the rainforest for many generations.

Questions

1. How do the Yanomami decorate themselves?

2. Why do the Yanomami not wear a lot of clothing?

3. What threats are the Yanomami facing?

4. What percentage of the Huli tribe does not live in a traditional way?

5. Describe the wig tradition of the Huli tribe, using your own words where possible.

6. When do the Huli men have to stop trying to grow their wigs?

7. Find and copy one word which means 'to stand out'.

8. For what reason do the pygmy tribe perform a ceremony before they hunt?

9. Why do you think disease might be a particular problem for the pygmy tribe?

10. Choose a tradition mentioned in the passage from any of the tribes that you are most interested in and explain why.
